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Soldier, Agent, Tax Man, Spy

By William Greider

THE SEPARATE scandals, as they became known one by one, read like a first rough draft of "1984."

The U.S. Army was uptight about Oleo Strut, a GI coffeehouse outside Ft. Hood, Tex., and so Oleo Strut was put under surveillance by military intelligence agents.

The FBI, among other things, was busy trying to penetrate the Black Student Union at Pennsylvania Military College, a quiet campus in Chester, Pa.

The IRS was scanning the tax returns of the Cummings Engine Foundation, looking for violations because that tax-exempt foundation gave some money to black activists and New Left theoreticians.

The CIA, which is supposed to gather intelligence on foreign powers, instead was trailing columnist Jack Anderson and his staff.

Those disjointed fragments are now beginning to form a more coherent picture: over the past eight years, the American government devoted enormous energy to a secret activity—spying on American citizens. It was done with videotape cameras and electronic bugs, with undercover agents and paid informers, with fancy computers and with the tacit consent or even encouragement of two Presidents from both political parties.

As usual, Sam Ervin, the retired senator from North Carolina, said it well: "Unfortunately, in the heat of political crisis, government and the men that wield its power become frightened by opinions they dislike. Their reaction is to combat those views by any power they have at hand — except the power of better ideas and better government."

The Fear Reflex

HOW DID IT happen? What is to prevent its happening again? If the new congressional committees on intelligence seriously confront the complex history of these episodes, they will find that the most important questions are still largely unanswered.

The issues of legality which surround government surveillance are at best unsettled and, even now, civil libertarians argue that there is no firm legal barrier to prevent similar controversies if the nation finds itself in a future period of domestic turmoil.

What is the long-term danger? It may sound melodramatic to invoke the image of George Orwell's "1984." And yet, if society fails to punish political spying or to build strong preventives into the law, it is easy enough to envision the eventual acceptance of these practices as legitimate activities, not just in times of social crisis, but always. That path would surely lead to a society quite different from the American ideal, a place where unorthodox ideas and free expression are permanently inhibited by the government's computer memory.

It is still not entirely clear what decisions produced this explosion of surveillance and dirty tricks. There are at least two competing theories. One, which might be called the theory of "spontaneous combustion," suggests that these various branches of government, watching the same frightening events, reacted individually but in similar ways. The other theory holds that the CIA or the FBI weren't acting irresponsibly on their own passion but were following "orders from above."

Although the factual evidence isn't settled, at least this much is clear: that these activities grew out of common reflexes of fear, that the regular inhibitions of decent men or traditional legal restraints which are supposed to prevent such abuses of power proved inadequate, not just in the CIA or the Justice Department or the FBI, but in the White House. Cities were burning. Radicals were, indeed, planting bombs in public buildings. The citizens' protest movement against the war in Vietnam—which seemed so impotent in terms of changing government policy—was most effective in frightening the men who made that policy.

Looking back, the circumstantial evidence does suggest that all of these activities were interrelated, at least to some degree. In a sense, that is mitigating testimony for the individual agencies. If one concludes that all of these bureaucracies were responding to the same alarm bells, then it is more difficult to portray the CIA or the FBI as a secret police force that has run amok in a democratic society.

Two Periods of Reaction

THE SIMPLIFIED history of events runs like this:

There were two distinct periods of fear when the federal government mobilized to gather intelligence on society's trouble-makers, whether they were anti-war demonstrators or black activists in America's central cities.

The first was in late 1967, after a tumultuous summer of urban riots, when the Justice Department under Attorney General Ramsey Clark formed its Inter-Divisional Information Unit to gather names and organiza-

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rousing meetings and fiery speeches of extremist civil rights groups." Military intelligence was equally interested in monitoring "subversive" efforts like the underground newspapers and GI coffeehouses which were fostering "resistance to the Army."

The CIA, as the public recently learned, also participated in its own limited way. The intelligence agency "inserted" 10 agents inside dissident groups in the Washington area, on the pretext that it was protecting CIA buildings against assault.

The second time of crisis within the government —which is better known probably because it was well exposed during the Watergate scandal—came in the summer of 1970 when a young White House aide named Tom Charles Huston wrote his famous memo calling on all agencies, from Justice to the CIA to the Pentagon's National Security Agency, to sign up for a broad and explicitly illegal campaign of surveillance. All but J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI were willing.

The CIA, by its own account, became active again, planting a dozen or so agents inside "dissident circles," allegedly to search for foreign connections. The Internal Revenue Service, meantime, had initiated in the summer of 1969 its own "special services staff," collecting names of political dissenters and investigating their taxes. And the FBI was sending its agents onto college campuses, with orders to start files on every Black Student Union in the nation.

Tantalizing Leads

IN BOTH PERIODS, the record is studded with tantalizing leads, essentially unresolved, which suggest that these various programs were more closely coordinated than anyone has quite admitted. For instance:

• When Ramsey Clark issued his first marching order for the IDIU, he noted: "You are free to consult with the FBI and other intelligence agencies in the government to draw on their experience in maintaining similar units, to explore the possibilities of obtaining information we do not now receive . . ."

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